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Unwelcome as the physical-distancing experience may be for most Canadians, environmentalists hope it will lead to lasting behavioural changes that reduce carbon footprints, such as less commuting to work and more appreciation of green space and being outdoors.

Their wish, as Climate Action Network executive director Catherine Abreu puts it, is for governments to “find ways to make those choices more convenient, so it doesn't feel like people are being harangued into them."

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Much of this comes down to a reimagining of cities better left to other levels of government, but Ottawa could play a role through stimulus. One approach would be to provide funding to municipalities, which already want more federal aid to deal with COVID-related cash crunches, for projects such as bike lanes and pedestrian ways. Another would be investing in improved broadband access which, in addition to other benefits, could facilitate more telecommuting.

An obvious obstacle, for now at least, is that it requires much guesswork about what Canadians' mindsets will be as they emerge from the pandemic.

That's a challenge with most ideas for stimulus spending. It's especially so when it relates so much to individual choices about whether to try to return to life as it existed before, or embrace a more climate-friendly new normal.

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